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History of English

Knowledge Fair (May 5, 2015)

Summary on “William Caxton: the First English Printer”

1. Brief Introduction of William Caxton

William Caxton was the first English person to work as a printer and also the first to introduce a [printing press](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Printing_press) into [England](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/England).

1. Life and Publishing

William Caxton was an apprentice to a well-to-do London mercer. After the death of his master, he left England for the Low Countries, mostly in Bruges. His business prospered there. In 1463 he became “Governor to the English Nation at Bruges”.

Because of the position, William Caxton got into contact with the European nobles. He entered the service of Margaret of York, the Duchess of Burgundy, sister of Edward IV of England. He told her that he was translating a French book, Raoul’s Le Fevre's *Recueil des Histoires de Troyes* but was concerned about the rudeness and imperfectness of English. The Duchess encouraged him to continue his translation and try to amend the English language.

Later in 1471 William Caxton study printing at Cologne, the most important center of printing since Johann Gutenberg printed the first book in Europe in 1455. Caxton then set up a printing press in Bruges, in collaboration with a Dutch, [Colard Mansion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colard_Mansion), in 1473. The first book they printed was *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*, translated by Caxton himself. It was the first book printed in English language. In 1476, Caxton returned to London and established the first printing press in England at Westminster. He published *The Dictes and Sayinges of the Philosophers*, the first book printed in England. He then published many books, such as Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*: the first version published in 1476 and the second, illustrated with woodblock prints, in 1483.

1. Publish in English?

In the Middle Age, Latin and France were the prestige languages which books were all published in. English was the rude dialect of the lower class. Why did William Caxton want to publish books in English?

Caxton did it because of money. Most of his publishes were religious writings, poems, and romances, which were the most popular among the English people. He also published according to his patrons’ favor, since part of his income relied on them. In addition, he published in English because he knew he could not compete with the Continental printers in England, the margin of Europe, if he printed in Latin.

1. Contributions to the Standardization of English

Though it was not his main purpose, William Caxton did contributed to the standardization of English. His books helped standardize the spelling. Though the spelling still varies widely within each book he printed, it was more stable than before. His books also promoted the London dialect as the standard version of English. The homogenization helped expand the English vocabulary and regularize the inflection and syntax. It also widened the gap between the spoken and the written word.

References

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“William Caxton.” *Encyclopedia Britainnica.* Retrieved from [http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/100766/William-Caxton#md-media-strip-tab-IMAGE-content](http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/100766/William-Caxton)

“William Caxton.” *Wikipedia.* Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Caxton>

Appendix: Additional Images

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| Images | Description | Resource |
|  | Device of William Caxton | “William Caxton.” *Wikipedia.* Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Caxton> |
|  | William Caxton’s typeface | <https://nickgraphic.wordpress.com/william-caxton-history/> |
|  | Caxton's Preface to Recuyell of the Histories of Troye (1473) | <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20393/20393-h/20393-h.htm#Page_1> |
|  | *Canterbury Tales* (1st edition) (1476) | Treasures in Full. British Library. <http://molcat1.bl.uk/treasures/caxton/search.asp> |
|  | Caxton’s Epilogue to *Dictes and Sayinges of the Philosophers* (1477) | <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20393/20393-h/20393-h.htm#Page_1> |
|  | Caxton’s earliest Woodcut | <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20393/20393-h/20393-h.htm#Page_1> |
|  | *Canterbury Tales* (2nd edition) (1483) | Treasures in Full. British Library. <http://molcat1.bl.uk/treasures/caxton/search.asp> |
|  | Caxton’s *Golden Legend* | <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20393/20393-h/20393-h.htm> |
|  | Caxton’s *Fifteen Oes* (1491) | <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20393/20393-h/20393-h.htm#Page_1> |
|  | William Caxton’s monogram | <https://nickgraphic.wordpress.com/william-caxton-history/> |